

SINGAPORE'S NATIONAL REPORT
TO UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION TO COMBAT
DESERTIFICATION (UNCCD)

APRIL 2000

INTRODUCTION

Global warming and climate change, ozone layer depletion, management of hazardous wastes, deforestation and desertification are some major environmental challenges confronting the world today. Recognising that co-operation is needed to address these global challenges, many nations have come together to discuss and explore ways of preserving and protecting the earth. Numerous international environmental agreements have been made. As a member of the global community, Singapore participates in many of these agreements. We ratified the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in December 1998.

Singapore subscribes to the principles of sustainable development. To assist fellow developing countries, our Prime Minister launched the US\$3 million STAPSD or “Singapore Technical Assistance Programme for Sustainable Development” for developing countries as Singapore’s contribution to the Global Initiative on Sustainable Development at the 19th UNGASS (19th Special Session of the UN General Assembly) in June 1997.

Singapore is appreciative of UN’s active involvement in global environmental concerns. The UN’s interest and involvement in regional environmental issues is equally important. UNEP’s lead role in mobilising international assistance to Indonesia was instrumental in helping the region deal with the forest fires and smoke haze. Singapore looks forward to the UN’s, in particular UNEP’s continued support in this area.

While Singapore believes that international cooperation is crucial to achieve a more sustainable future for the world community, we also recognise that every country has to be responsible for the preservation of its own environment. Desertification is not a problem that directly affects Singapore. However, rapid urbanisation has subjected our fragile natural ecosystems to severe stress. As our population increases, the pressure for more land accelerates alongside with the increased demand for an attractive and comfortable living environment.

As a small city-state faced with several constraints on our land use, the challenge for Singapore is to create a living and working environment with world class technology and facilities that allows the space for privacy and maintains contact with nature.

MAINTAINING SINGAPORE'S BIODIVERSITY

1. Rapid urbanisation across the globe, particularly in the last 50 years, has had a profound impact on the natural environment, shrinking it at a worrisome rate. Natural ecosystems, which have taken millions of years to evolve, are fragile and their existence are increasingly under threat due to habitat destruction, alteration and the invasion of exotic species. Biological diversity is being lost at a rapidly increasing rate. Indeed, some scientists estimate that human activities cause the extinction of 50 to 100 species of animals and plants a day, compared to a natural extinction rate of 10 species per century.

Singapore's Experience and Challenges

2. Much of Singapore's pristine natural areas disappeared in the early part of this century. Fortunately, however, Singapore still has a rich biodiversity of plants and animals, with species numbers exceeding that of the United Kingdom or Canada. Still, more than 10% of our mammal and bird species have been lost in the last 150 years. Many of our plant species are thankfully not in a state of rapid decline, according to our National Institute of Education scientists who conducted a limited study of the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve.

3. For the proper management of our natural areas, including the native plants and animals they harbour, well-planned scientific studies must be carried out. Singapore's National Parks Board, for instance, coordinated a Nature Reserves Survey to document Singapore's indigenous biodiversity. More of such surveys would have to be done in the future to help take stock of our natural heritage with a view to protecting it.

4. In the face of Singapore's rapid urbanisation, special effort is made to preserve and indeed enhance our garden environment – both in respect of our nature areas and also our man-made parks and green spaces. Only then can we truly achieve our goal of making Singapore a most liveable and attractive city. Singapore's "greening" programme started way back in the 1960s and has picked up momentum over the years. The National Parks Board aims to create a pervasive garden environment over the whole island, making Singapore our city within a garden.

5. To overcome the constraints of land scarcity in Singapore, conjuring innovative ways of maximising land use becomes a constant challenge. One important strategy we have adopted is to incorporate as many compatible uses in our green spaces. Parks, for instance, are increasingly being opened up for other compatible uses, from horticultural planting to venues for staging outdoor concerts. They serve as landscaped areas where

Singaporeans can play, relax, learn or simply enjoy being close to nature. Roadside trees are another important component of our greening programme. These ubiquitous roadside trees do a lot more than offer shade and soften the built environment; they also serve as habitats and food for birds, lizards and insects, and reduce air and noise pollution.

6. Singapore's nature areas are especially important, as has been acknowledged in the Singapore Green Plan. These nature areas range from the primary rain forests in our nature reserves to the secondary forests and mangroves in places such as Sungei Buloh Nature Park, a thriving bird sanctuary. These nature areas serve as the protective refuge for our native plants and animals.

7. They are also essential for the crucial ecological life processes that go on even in urbanised settlements, such as the carbon cycle, the nitrogen cycle, the water cycle. These days, they are also being used as "nature labs" to enrich the minds of our younger generation.

8. Small countries like Singapore, however, are inevitably confronted by the dilemma between releasing more land for development or conserving nature areas. Indeed, our experience in recent times has shown that even the provision of basic amenities to make some of these nature sites more accessible to the general public could draw loud protests from some nature-lovers. The Government takes the view that neither development nor conservation is mutually exclusive – it is not a case of having one or the other, period. Rather, it is a case of striking an optimal balance so as to accommodate both these important needs.
